

Mall School

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By Porpentine Charity Heartscape

You may remember Porpentine Charity Heartscape from Vesp: A History of Scaphic Sapphism, the interactive fiction head-trip we published earlier this year. Mall School, a rare venture into linear storytelling from Porpentine, is a hallucinogenic vision of feral commerce; brands, having mutated and gone to seed, sow madness on a mallbound generation weaned on #engagement and digital pets. — The Eds.

Mall school begins today. The malltrix escorts us onto the escalator, her eyes seething scanlines. It's so crowded all I can do is hunch down between everyone's legs and stare at the step I'm on. It's covered in initials and gum and stickers. I try to scratch my name but I don't have anything sharp enough.

Lessons beam into our skirt-brains. My fingers clench and smooth at the hot, overclocked fabric as my threads turn green with knowledge. Grey threads are waiting to be filled. Red threads are defragmented in the 15 minute room.

After class we ride to food court. Greasy steaming food blasts from pipes, each marked with the sigil of the brand controlling it. I run really fast to the one with tangled green and yellow snakes, and pick jalapeños and banana peppers and cheddar off the floor slippery with sweet onion sludge.

Showers are next. Hot fans dry us off. Nasty chemicals itch on my skin. My hair feels thin and brittle from the routine. I stand close to Jennifer because I know if I don't someone is going to try something. Her eyes are so milky and stupid looking they make people want to hit her.

Mood: Contemptuous

Music: Crazy Frog (Cursed Remix)

On the escalator ride back home I turn on my smartbangle and log onto NeoHumanPets and check my human pony. The camera feed is fuzzy. Through the grey snow I watch it bang its head against the wall of its Dream Room (level 1). I pay a coin and white liquid pours out of a nozzle and the human pony drinks it from the floor where it also makes messes.

I meet up with Jennifer in the burnt kiosk near my apartment, aka our top secret HQ. Sunglasses are fused to the walls like a mound of shiny black bug eyes. A demoscene is graffitied to the grimy floor, pulsing with chiptune moss.

She tries to brush my hair but I grab the brush, my fingers sinking into the purple-tipped white bristles. I tilt it away. It hurts my scalp. Hair comes away with each brush. I stopped brushing months ago. I think she has trouble understanding we can't brush our hair like we used to.

I ask if she wants to play NeoHumanPets instead. She smiles because she's always excited to show me her pet. Her pet has feathers. There's a fun video that shows the machine punching the feathers into its skin. It has really great music. I made it my ringtone.

Lots of new people are in the 3D chatroom. The lobby is full of default blue avatars because the system is still downloading the av pack from the other mallcologies. I think it's a field trip.

One of the defaults turns into a bunny girl with ruby gems for eyes. She moves jerkily across the screen and disappears into Meadow Dungeon 3. I'm too shy to talk to the people with the real nice Gaia Online avatars, so I go back and check on my NeoHumanPet. It's crying on the floor of its cell but it'll be okay. The cell is designed so it can't hurt itself. There are Sparkle Mood Potions for 10 Coins but I'm saving up for a new smartbangle.

Understand: I'm the only girl on my floor with a bangle that doesn't have polyphonic ringtones or thermal tracking or RealPlayer. it's basically a shitty piece of plastic.

Mood: *insane*

Music: *Aaddhadhdsaghdghdsfhgsfdgh – AHHhhhhddshsdh*

Jennifer's stomach is growling so I ask if she wants to come back to my apartment. My mom gave me the key since she works late so I press the button and the metal curtain grinds up.

We eat Panda Express orange chicken out of a plastic bag. Well, not exactly. We have a way of making the food last longer. If you keep the food wet and warm it'll grow new food on itself. So we suck on the chicken and put it back in the bag. I don't really like the white green food but mom doesn't make a lot of money so it's not like we can just go out and order Nokia fries whenever we want.

Then my mom gets home. She's drunk and her MIDI skirt is playing a song I don't recognize. I ask, can you take us to Claire's so I can buy an actual smartbangle?

She hugs me, the way she does when she's really drunk and can't tell that her claw is digging into my ribs. She says hold on I have to use the bathroom and disappears for a few minutes. I bang on the door. I know she's fallen asleep. Her skirt is still plinking but it doesn't wake her up. Training the mannequins at Victoria's Secret sounds really exhausting.

Claire's is way too far without mom's escalatorvoucher but the combination Forever 21/Taco Bell is just a floor up. I don't know how to afford a bangle but I really want it now, so badly, so I don't go crazy. Each day is so incredibly long. And everyone else is fine doing the same thing over and over again, but I'm not.

I'm counting my coins, running my finger between the tiles, when Jennifer says let's go "buy" you a bangle, and does that really slow stupid wink that I think is cute.

Halfway across the plaza and I'm bleeding and want to die. I get my period every week, always aching and oozing out of me. I hate how I have no control over my fucked up body. I clean the tip of my Tampagotchipon in the fountain and sit on the floor and put it inside. The screen sticks out of me crusted with bloodshit and I watch my Tampagotchi's food bar fill up. It says: YAY. It's glowing which means it's going to evolve soon. This makes me "happy."

The Forever 21/Taco Bell looks clean and white on the outside, but inside it's all dark and neon purple and full of tinkling bells. The salesgirls wander the floor whispering to the air, asking if it needs help. It's hard to see them coming in the dark so I'm kinda jumpy.

Cool Ranch Dorito Dolce & Gabbana perfume is on sale. Jennifer sprays her wrist with the sample bottle and sucks at it.

I find the smartbangle of my dreams, the Best Friend 3 Tweentastic Bangle textured in Obsidian Cookies and Cream. There are some other girls ordering tacos and dresses and being loud so I look at Jennifer until she gets the hint and slips it in her pocket and walks around the detector gates and no one sees us.

Jennifer knows how to remove the shoplifting stopper device thingy so it doesn't squirt you with acid. She's good at lifting. She got me my Tampagotchipon which makes it basically bearable to have these painful cramps all the time. Pain is different when your pain helps someone you love. That's something my mom said, except she didn't really say it like that.

But she does a lot for me.

Mood: XD

Music: Muzak Infinity (Best of Algorithm 23773)

I equip the smartbangle. It hurts a little digging into my wrist but after tasting my blood it calms down.

My smartbangle is demoing its features, telling me how many ratkids are in a ten tile radius. Way more than I thought. You used to be able to trade their tails for coins, but a lot of people were getting bit and struggling with depression from their rabies. If you go for a walk on the lower floors you can hear the ratkids running into the electric zappers. Some must have gotten under the floor up here. It's kind of comforting thinking the malltrices don't control everything.

Jennifer had a custom ratkid skin on her NeoHumanPet that she designed herself. The ceiling of each cell has this tattoo machine that drops down. But she got an email saying it was an unlicensed skin so her NeoHumanPet was deleted and they never even warned her or anything, and now she can't even make custom skins, the button is grayed out.

That really fucked her up but she got a new NeoHumanPet after a couple months which made me happy because we mostly hang out online. I wish we lived closer. She lives in the big dark field where all the beds are, inside the JCPenny orphanage.

Plus, escalators are scary, someone got stuck in the one on my floor before. I watched from behind plastic ferns and saw the janitrices pull bloody hair from between the steps. They put the organs in boxes full of ice cubes and said, ship these to Sharper Image.

I'm hiding in some shiny green plants right now, cool leaves sticking to my skin. Trying to customize my bangle but it's stuck on the AOL loading sigil. My old bangle was EarthLink so I'm not really sure how much blood it needs to config.

Something clicks nearby. I look at Jennifer and she's just sucking on her wrist where the Cool Ranch scent was. I pull her wrist away before she bleeds again and look through the leaves for the click. Is a ratkid bruxing? Their teeth can get pretty loud.

A malltrix's heels appear between the leaves. I should be scared but I just feel dizzy and tired. I pick at a piece of dried gum on the marble, rubbing Jennifer's back so she doesn't freak out.

The malltrix's walky talkie crackles and loud weird voices growl. She moves on. I use her clicking to tell how far away she is—now that I'm paying attention, I'm pretty good at it, like that sonar thing submarine games do. Boop! Boop! Boop! She walked past the Cinnabon/Hot Topic hatchery, I think, and the clicking made a metal sound before stopping, so she probably got on an escalator.

Smoke from her cigarette still lingers. It smells like Wet Seal. It makes me want to go to Wet Seal. I used to smoke stubs I found on the ground because it calmed me down but mom stopped me. She got a branded tumor in her right wrist when she used to smoke a lot which is probably why she doesn't want me doing it. I respect and love my mom.

Instead I spend a lot of time at GameStop playing the display games to distract myself. They're all shovelware versions of games that were popular a long time ago. A spiky blue pig rampages through a jungle exploding randomly into jewelry. I want to be a shovelware designer when I grow up. I can do it better.

Another part of my brain failed last week. They implanted a replacement chunk. I think a lot of the chunks are pretty old. I don't recognize some of the memories. They make me want to cry. My brain feels very old and very young at the same time.

This chunk keeps thinking about its apartment on floor 5 with the Helly Kitty dolls and the mini-fridge full of boba. It wants to go back there. It

doesn't understand those floors are flooded. We went on a schooltrip to floor 7 one time and watched the fish swim around above the drowned escalators and kiosks. Green murky water. I sneak down there sometimes because I'm clever and stealthy. The air is cool and smells different. I like to spy on the adults when they take their clothes off and put on goggles and jump in the water and bring up the soft things for eating. I watch their bodies wind through mall labyrinths, painted with DeviantArt canvas tattoos.

The way the water moves down there, very calm and gentle, made my brain think in a different way. I thought, why keep having brains, we should stop fixing brains and let us all die, so the shape of the world can find itself again, because this can't be the shape it was supposed to be.

Mood: thinking thoughts

Music: Polyphonic Ringtone Medley III

Jennifer and I head home, crouched on the escalators so the adults can't see us. The rustle of tissue paper from the Victoria's Secret bags helps me find our way through the dark. If we're in the wet part of the apartment, the tissue paper doesn't make a sound. Obviously we keep the mattress in the dry part. I'm very proud of this system.

I don't think I'm going to fall asleep before school starts but I find some default sounds in my new smartbangle and hook it up to my earbuds and start listening to macintosh_startup_sound_paulstretched.wav on loop.

I'm glad mom fell asleep in the bathroom because there's more room on the mattress. Jennifer is very small and thin, even smaller than me. I hold her hand because it helps her sleep. The cool thing about it is that my hand is getting held at the same time.